The Society of Architectural Historians mourns the loss of William H. Pierson, who died on 3 December 2008 at the age of ninety-seven. Pierson was a founding figure of American architectural history, and he helped transform an antiquarian pastime into the formal profession it is today. He taught from 1940 to 1973 at Williams College, where he was one of the three professors who inspired a generation of undergraduates who became jocularly known as the “Williams Art Mafia” for their prominence in the art world as museum directors, college presidents, scholars, and collectors.

Pierson’s service to the SAH was prodigious. He joined the Society in 1955, and well into his nineties he attended the annual meetings, his characteristic whimsy and robust warmth undiminished. But though he was a familiar figure, it was not widely known just how remarkable his career was. Or—more precisely—his careers, for there were several. By the time he became a historian of architecture in his mid-thirties, he was already an accomplished painter, a pilot, and a naval officer with a place in military history. If his thoughts about buildings and their makers had an uncommon depth and resonance, it was the resonance of an uncommon life.

William Harvey Pierson, Jr. was born in Bloomfield, New Jersey on June 4, 1911. His father was an electrical inspector who devised several important safety innovations, including the outlet box, and gave his son a lifelong interest in mechanical processes. Pierson’s drawing abilities impressed one of his high school teachers, who brought him to Charles Warren Eaton, the elderly Hudson River School painter. Eaton took him under his wing, encouraged him to study painting, and inspired him to read Ruskin and Emerson.

Pierson would have preferred to study architecture but when he arrived at Yale in 1930 the Depression had broken out. He shifted to painting, which cost half as much in tuition, and for the next six years he made ends meet by singing tenor in a semiprofessional male quartet. (Music would play an important role throughout his life, and he later used his GI Bill benefits to take formal voice lessons.) He received a BFA in 1934 and an MFA in 1936, the first year Yale awarded the degree. But he remained close to architecture, taking part in the monthly competitions sponsored by the Beaux-Arts Institute of Design, which often called for collaborations between an architect, painter, and sculptor. He married one of those sculptors, Margaret Post, in 1936. During his final year as an MFA student at Yale, he taught life drawing to the architecture students, including Eero Saarinen. Pierson was present at that most notorious architectural critique, when the monthly subject was a “house for a dictator,” for which Saarinen presented an intentionally scurrilous model of a shack crushed by a falling tree.

Pierson’s own art, with its sturdy pictorial structure and preference for local subjects, was shaped by the American Scene painters. But the opportunities then available were for public murals, and with these he struggled. Having mastered the plastic modeling of the human form, he disliked having
to subordinate it to the flat wall. When recalling this period, he would laughingly pantomime the contortions that ensued when hands, wrists, and elbows had to be squeezed into one plane. After just one mural—for a hospital in Montclair, New Jersey (now lost)—he decided he would devote himself to the study of great art rather than the making of passable art.

In 1938 Pierson enrolled in New York University’s Institute for Fine Arts, then in the first flowering of its transplanted German brilliance. Its German intellectual tradition, however, differed strongly from the French orientation of Yale, where aesthetic considerations came foremost. As a painter he bristled at the way color was neglected at NYU. Having now become a proficient photographer (who throughout his life would take the photographs for his own books), he made his own slides for a seminar report on Rembrandt drawings, the first time color slides were used at the Institute. While it delighted his classmates, he later recalled, “it didn’t make any impression at all.”

Pierson received his MA in 1941, by which time he had already been hired to teach studio art at Williams. He was working on his PhD and planning a dissertation on Baroque painting when the attack on Pearl Harbor came. The next morning, he took a train to Boston and enlisted in the navy, serving for four years. He saw action in both the Atlantic and Pacific theaters, for which he won the Bronze Star. He served in the Navy Reserve until 1971, retiring with the rank of commander.

Upon joining the Navy, because of his qualifications as both an educator and visual artist, Pierson was immediately assigned to Project Affirm, a top-secret program based at Quonset Point, Rhode Island. Its task was to apply the new technology of radar to nighttime aerial combat, but it was soon recognized that radar had wider applications. Throughout naval history, battles had always been directed from the bridge of a ship and guided by eyesight alone. But electronic rather than visual information was now dictating decisions, and the interiors of ships needed to be reconfigured to accommodate the new technology. Pierson was charged with creating a new kind of control room in which radar and sonar data could be smoothly integrated into the decision-making process. He recruited Harold Grieve, a prominent Hollywood set designer, to create a physical mockup, which they assembled in Washington and demonstrated to Admiral Ernest King, the Commander-in-Chief of the Navy. King approved the prototype, which was dubbed the Combat Information Center (CIC), and installed it throughout the Navy; the CIC remains the nerve center of all modern warships. When Pierson would later look at the way in which great forces of history and social change converged in the creation of an architectural space, he had already been party to one such act of creation.

The last year of the war, spent on an aircraft carrier in the Pacific, was decisive for Pierson’s career. Finding himself thinking more and more about his own country, which he had scarcely seen for several years, he returned to NYU intent on writing a dissertation on American art. When a prominent member of the faculty asked him if there was such a thing, he promptly left NYU and returned to Yale. There Carroll Meeks supervised his dissertation on industrial architecture in the Berkshires. In particular, Pierson looked at the role of insurance companies in promoting the “slow-burning” system of heavy timber construction. Here his analysis recapitulated his wartime experience with the application of radar. In each instance, the process by which society absorbed and capitalized on a new technology was laborious but was rich in unexpected consequences. He received his PhD in the fall of 1949.

Over the course of his years at Williams, as student interest turned to abstract art, Pierson gave up teaching studio art to concentrate on art history. Nonetheless, his lectures were indisputably those of an artist, who brought an artist’s perfectionism to delivery as well as content. As a lecturer he was extraordinary, with a remarkably vital presence, his voice resonant as he punctuated his remarks with the graceful hand gestures that were his trademark, his eyes beaming with mischief. In his early years he recorded his lectures, listening to them to identify unconscious verbal mannerisms and to eliminate them. “You’d be surprised how many verbal tics you have,” he liked to say. But his lectures were not over-rehearsed affairs: having seen one of his NYU professors discard his notes after a brilliant lecture, he resolved never to repeat a classroom lecture. It was the living quality of his thought, at the podium or in conversation, rather than any self-conscious showmanship, that made him so spellbinding a speaker.

It was characteristic of Pierson’s selflessness that his greatest professional efforts went into developing resources for the field at large. In 1956, when the Carnegie Corporation decided to underwrite the first comprehensive set of color slides for teaching American art, he was named executive secretary to the project. He worked on it full time for two years, taking a leave of absence from Williams. Working in tandem with the University of Georgia and Sandak, an innovative photographic house in New York, he handled every aspect of the project, choosing the proper type of film and method of processing, and even helping determine the selection of objects. A total of 4,008 large-format color negatives were made, encompassing an extraordinarily broad range of what is now termed visual culture: maps and advertisements, costumes and industrial
design, comics and theater sets. Now in digital form, it remains a major resource for the teaching of American art.

So too is the SAH’s ongoing Buildings of the United States series, which Pierson conceived in 1978. Modeled on Nicholas Pevsner’s Buildings of England and envisioned as the most ambitious survey of American architecture since the Great Depression, it remains the largest project ever undertaken by the Society. For the first decade, Pierson was the prime mover, raising the start-up funds, securing a publisher, and personally editing the first group of manuscripts. He lived to see twelve of the projected sixty volumes appear.

Pierson’s lifework is American Buildings and Their Architects, which he coauthored with his friend and colleague William Jordy. It began life, rather improbably, in 1957 with a request from Doubleday for a 250-page book for its Anchor Book Series; it grew incorrigibly, from two to four and finally five volumes. Pierson was fortunate in working with Jordy, another painter-turned-historian whose thoughts about buildings and about language were similar to his own. This went far beyond the uncanny sensitivity to color that they shared. Each brought a lively tactile alertness to a building, which they judged on its own terms, according to its aesthetic and conceptual integrity, and not as a link in an evolutionary chain. The result is the case study method that distinguishes American Buildings and Their Architects from virtually every other survey of American architecture.

When possible, Pierson wrote his first drafts on site, as he did at Monticello, where he became intrigued by Thomas Jefferson’s standup desk. He replicated Jefferson’s standup desk in Williamstown, thereafter doing all of his writing from a standing position, much as he had while a standup desk in Williamstown, thereafter doing all of his writing from a standing position, much as he had while a painter—a sight that never failed to charm his visitors. But in one other respect, his writing recalled his painting, and this was his delight in a process of slow, patient, incremental refinement. That process could be lengthy, as in the case with his final volume of American Buildings and Their Architects, whose slow gestation has become something of a SAH legend.

That final volume, entitled The Architecture of Abundance, was originally envisioned as a survey of late-nineteenth-century architecture, but a decade ago its scope changed dramatically in the wake of a visit to H. H. Richardson’s celebrated Ames Gate Lodge. There Pierson saw for the first time certain sculptural elements of the building, some by Augustus Saint-Gaudens, which had been obscured by later alterations. The encounter was electrifying, and it set in motion a far-reaching reexamination of that building and, inevitably, a rethinking of much of his book. He devoted most of the last decade to that rethinking. His manuscript was essentially complete some time ago, although he was still making minor revisions a few weeks before his death. A number of his friends are now undertaking the bittersweet task of seeing it through to publication.

In 1997, the Williams College art museum held an exhibition of Pierson’s drawings and paintings, entitled When I Was a Painter, and he gave a short talk about them to the undergraduate docents. One, taken aback by the utter frankness of the life drawing, asked how she should explain all the nakedness to tour groups of schoolchildren. Luckily, he was being tape-recorded that week in connection with the exhibition, and we have the words he told her:

Think of it this way: the human body is the most magnificent organism on the face of the earth. There’s nothing like it. No other animal, no other creature, no other organism has the capacity of the human body to think, to move, to act, to love, to hate, to create—to do all the wonderful things these kids themselves are doing everyday. Therefore, if you’re going to be a painter and you’re going to use the human figure, you have to know how that human body works and you can’t find out how it works if it’s got all those clothes on; you have to study it in the nude where you can see its muscles work and you see how those things behave under stress and change and turn. . . . That’s as far as I can tell you, that it is simply the glory of the human body that you’re trying to master.

Such was Pierson’s impromptu defense of the human body, and of the artist’s eye. That he later turned that eye toward architecture was our great good fortune; it set a standard of discernment, penetration, and sympathy that is not easily met. We mourn Bill Pierson, we honor him, and we express our gratitude for the many gifts of his palatial heart. 

M I C H A E L  J. L E W I S
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Note
In writing this tribute I was aided immeasurably by the many colleagues, friends, and former students of Bill Pierson who wrote or called to share their thoughts and anecdotes, far too many to name individually here. Please accept my sincere thanks.